

‘The World According to Jesus’

Address for the Council of Christians and Jews,
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By Lorraine Parkinson.

I believe that what I say will be of interest for both Christians and Jews. From the outset, let me make it perfectly clear that what I have written in my book ‘The World According to Jesus’ and what I will say here is not related to the traditional Christian interpretation of Jesus which calls him the Messiah. I am not talking about the theological construct called Jesus Christ.

To the contrary – I have said in the book that I do not see Jesus as a Messiah – either in his own time, or now. I also hasten to add that I know what I say will not be entirely in agreement with the views of many other Christians. I do not represent all Christians, and I venture to say that no one Christian can represent the enormous variety within 21st century Christianity. But I certainly do represent a growing movement within Christianity – right across the board in the mainstream churches. My husband Dr John Bodycomb has described this growing movement as a great stream of thought, spreading like floodwaters across a plain, reaching into every corner as it goes.

The movement is known variously as Progressive Christianity, or Progressing Christianity, or Evolving Christianity, or the Emerging Church. I personally prefer the idea of Christianity as evolving. Evolving or Progressive Christianity actually repudiates a messianic or christological interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth. It argues instead for reclaiming and taking seriously the ethical precepts within his teaching. It regards Jesus as the historical teacher and interpreter of the Law of Moses, who called people to create what he called ‘the Kingdom of heaven’ on earth. In other words, he showed them how to bring about the best possible world. As I will point out, there are therefore strong similarities between the ethical precepts espoused by Evolving or Progressive Christianity and those adhered to by Judaism, especially the idea of *Tikkun Olam* (‘repair of the world’).

There is no doubt that the most well-known first century Jew is Jesus (or *Yeshua*) of Nazareth. There are of course hundreds of references to him in the New Testament. But apart from that, there are several independent historical references to him by Roman writers. In the case of the gospel writers, each of them wrote his gospel specifically to make his own case for Jesus as Messiah or (in Greek) *Christos*. I believe that there is every

reason to think that Jesus never thought of himself as a Messiah, and never claimed to be one. The question and answer sequences in the gospels where Jesus asks his students what other people are saying about him are written by the gospel writers so that the students (or disciples) can arrive at the answer considered by the writers as correct, i.e., “You are the Messiah”.

Jesus was in fact a teacher of the Law. As such, he introduced new interpretations of the Law – as other teachers have done, both then and now. In his time the scriptures were already ancient. They originated in a nomadic society and were developed through the growth of monarchies and towns and cities, and the periods of exile of that society’s leaders. They did not relate specifically to the occupied society in which Jesus lived. He obviously saw a need to reinterpret ethical precepts which would lend themselves to new meaning for his day, without destroying the original spirit of the Law. Hence came his teachings about how to deal non-violently with a brutally oppressive empire. His teachings came from his vision for what he called ‘the Kingdom of heaven on earth’, in which God’s Law reigned, not Caesar’s. In all of this he was illustrating how the understanding of the Law could evolve, without any need to alter its truth.

In the Sermon on the Mount as compiled by Matthew he says, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law.*”

In the same way, Evolving Christianity builds on scriptural tradition – reinterpreting it in accordance with the way human society and its understanding of reality have also evolved.

It is important to know that the New Testament was written from 20 to 70 years after Jesus’ execution, by which time messianic ideas about Jesus had developed, including expectation of his imminent ‘second coming’. As we know, some Christians are still waiting for that. But we should acknowledge something here. It is not surprising that many Jews in the first century were looking for a Davidic-style Messiah to lead them against the Romans. The peasant class in particular felt the oppression of Roman occupation, and naturally they looked for the intervention of God through a messianic deliverer. During the first century several Jewish insurrectionists (some called Zealots) were regarded as messiahs, but inevitably they were wiped out by the Romans, along with their bands of rebels. The leaders were usually crucified for rebelling against Caesar. These freedom fighters came mainly from the Galilee, as did the rebel

leader Bar Abbas, whom the gospels say was released by Pontius Pilate instead of Jesus.

There are good reasons why it is highly unlikely that Jesus saw himself as a Messiah, if one takes into account the actual teachings attributed to him. The corpus of teachings from Jesus I have concentrated on in my book is known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’. This is not an actual ‘sermon’. It is a compilation of sayings that Jesus must have repeated in various places and on various occasions. These sayings would have become associated with him and remembered by people who heard them. One of the reasons they would have been remembered is that in accordance with the teaching techniques of his time and place, they consist either of sayings, or of stories also known as parables. Sayings and parables are excellent vehicles for remembering the points a teacher wants to make.

Another slightly quirky reason for believing the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and associated parables are genuine Jesus-speak, is that they are actually at odds with the overall messianic theme of the gospels. In short, there is nothing messianic (or christological) in the Sermon on the Mount. Its teaching does not rely on the intervention of God at an ‘end time’, to ‘fix up the world’. That kind of scenario is traditionally associated with the coming of a Messiah, who would then reign over a renewed world. Jesus’ authentic teachings contain nothing about God intervening to defeat the Romans through a messianic deliverer. Implicitly, they even argue against that, as I will show you.

In fact, the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are the best set of ‘do it yourself’ instructions you could find anywhere. They are not readings for a tutorial on Theoretical Ethics 1.01. They are a working blueprint for building the best possible world. But they will never become reality unless they are picked up, considered carefully, and acted on! Jesus acknowledged that when he told his followers: “The Kingdom of heaven is within you!” Or it is nowhere. Recently I came across a book by the Jewish Rabbi Robert N. Levine. The book has the intriguing title: “There is no Messiah and you’re it”! It represents Rabbi Levine’s challenge to everyone to take personal responsibility for repairing the world. What I’m saying is that Jesus of Nazareth said the same thing, and gave the guidelines for doing just that.

It may seem strange that this teaching about taking responsibility for the world is included in gospels written especially to portray Jesus as the Messiah. Commonly known traditions say the Messiah will appear at an eschatological ‘end time’ when God intervenes to defeat evil. The

gospel writers found those ideas in the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who pioneered the understanding of Jesus as Messiah, and so laid the foundation for the new religion called Christianity. Paul first wrote about a second coming of Jesus as Messiah about 25 years following the crucifixion. But that kind of anticipation was by no means new thinking. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain the same kind of expectations of a Messiah, after a war between the ‘sons of darkness’ and the ‘sons of light’.

The gospel writers were very much influenced by the messianic thought of Paul. In Paul’s first Letter to his followers in Thessalonica, he predicted that they would rise up to meet Jesus in the air, on the day he returned to earth. This has become known as the Rapture. When I was Minister of the West Hawthorn Uniting Church, the congregation included university students living in houses owned by the parish. Some of them had come from conservative parishes in country Victoria. One day I noticed a bumper sticker on a student’s car. It read: “Warning! In the event of the Rapture, this car will become driverless.”

So why are the ‘do it yourself’ teachings of Jesus of Nazareth included in gospels which are looking to an apocalyptic end-time, in which God would destroy the old world and create a new one? What I’m about to say could be called the argument from awkwardness. I think the teachings in Sermon on the Mount are there because the gospel writers knew very well that they are indeed Jesus’ authentic teachings. They knew very well that Jesus was widely associated with them. They simply could not leave his own teachings out of gospels which claim to be telling his story. Of course the gospels themselves are not historical records. They take the form of ‘sermons’ about Jesus as the Christ or Messiah.

Christians ever since can only be grateful that the actual teachings of Jesus himself were included in the gospels and therefore passed down through the generations. Whenever the church has remembered Jesus’ teachings and tried to carry them out, it has been a force for good in the world. When it has forgotten the teachings and proclaimed an all-conquering Messiah/Christ, it has promoted division and exclusiveness.

The Jewish people would be the first to agree that ideas from early Christianity about Jesus as a divine Christ killed by the Jews, opened the door to the longest and most murderous hatred in the history of humanity.

So what are these teachings of Jesus? What is it that so many progressive Christians regard as an essential foundation for the future of

the church? For the purpose of this address, it does not matter whether you have read 'The World According to Jesus'. I'm not going to assume you already know what's in the book. Instead, I will give you an idea of what it contains and the implications of that for Christianity's relations with people of other faiths, and even, with those of no religious faith.

After the introduction, the first section deals with a huge question – the problem of the existence of evil in a world created by a good God. Given that Jesus was passionately committed to the creation of what he called 'the Kingdom of heaven' or the best possible world, the question must be: "Is this meant to be a perfect world, where there is no longer any evil thought or action, and where there is no pain or suffering?" I do not believe so. After all, there never has been a perfect world without pain and suffering, and the conditions of life on Planet Earth means there never will be a perfect world. All of Jesus' teachings apply to difficult times, never to a perfect world. He appeared to know that the best to be hoped for is a human race transformed by ultimate ethical precepts, trying to ensure the best possible life for all people. Even so, there will also be tsunamis, volcanoes, floods, bushfires, diseases and accidents.

The second section of the book discusses 8 small nutshells called 'The Beatitudes'. The Beatitudes encapsulate fundamental ethical principles and point to personal qualities which relate to them. These are expanded on and commented on, in the rest of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. If these principles and qualities are adopted and internalised and acted on, they could first of all transform human beings to become the best people they can be. Their transformation would then be the catalyst for creating the best possible world.

In my book, for each Beatitude I have applied a particular key to their understanding. When Jesus' vision about the best possible world is placed alongside each Beatitude, its original meaning can be uncovered. The wisdom in each of the 'nutshells' can be revealed.

In short, each Beatitude describes a characteristic of persons who are equipped to create the 'kingdom of heaven' on earth (or become involved in *Tikkun Olam*). Let me give you those characteristics.

1. The ability to be humble in mind. This is the characteristic of someone who is not hung up on his or her own importance. He or she has no need to feel superior to anyone else, or to claim material goods or other privileges that are not available to everyone. Because of that, the humble-minded person is not a wimp, but is

immensely strong. He or she is equipped to establish equal respect for the rights and humanity of all people.

2. The ability to overcome adversity. The person with this characteristic knows what it is to lose people or things very important and dear, but has the strength to see and create a new future. For Jesus' oppressed and tyrannised people, this was an essential attribute if they were to look forward, rather than backward. It remains so in the 21st century, in individual lives, and in the challenges of the wider society.
3. The ability to resist oppression or persecution non-violently. This is the core of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of heaven. This is the characteristic of people who have seen at first-hand the destruction and futility of violence. In the first century under the Romans, this kind of devastating outcome to armed resistance was all around. Jesus saw that in his lifetime and he found a way to resist violent and heartless power without resorting to more violence. (I'll say more about that shortly).
4. The ability to bring justice to the disadvantaged. This characteristic is sometimes called 'righteousness' in scripture. It is an essential quality of people who will need to 'repair' the unjust structures of society and eliminate the gap between the 'haves' and 'have notes'.
5. The ability to empathise with others. Justice without compassion can be as 'cold as charity'. Compassion includes feeling others' pain, or sadness, or need. Justice and compassion are essential partners in repairing the world.
6. The ability to make and keep a commitment. To hang in there and make a difference for the good requires undivided commitment. Only those not afraid of dedicating themselves to the best kind of world will be able to ring in the changes.
7. The ability to forgive. Peace without forgiveness is usually fleeting, and leads to more conflict; more violence. The forgiving person can heal the wounds of the past and open the way to lasting peace.
8. The ability to overcome fear. Changing the social order usually means confrontation with authority. The person whose

commitment to the best kind of world has overcome their fear can persevere in the face of persecution.

So – they are:

- The ability to be humble in mind.
- The ability to overcome adversity.
- The ability to resist oppression non-violently.
- The ability to bring justice to the disadvantaged.
- The ability to empathise with others in need.
- The ability to make and keep a commitment.
- The ability to forgive the past.
- The ability to overcome fear.

Associated with those characteristics are what I have called ‘the Teachings’. There are eighteen of them in the Sermon on the Mount itself, but outside of it there are many parables about ‘the Kingdom of heaven’. The parables clearly relate to both the Beatitudes and the Teachings. Whereas the Beatitudes set out the attributes of people who follow Jesus’ blueprint for the best kind of world, the Teachings are directed toward people who are actually getting on with the task (or embracing the concept of *Tikkun Olam*).

The aim of the Teachings is to inform the everyday task of making that a reality. In some cases they expand on what it means to put into practice the attributes encapsulated in the Beatitudes. In other cases they simply acknowledge how difficult it will be to follow the ethical blueprint for a better world. They include two very well-known traditions. One is the Lord’s Prayer (known in Catholic circles as the ‘Our Father’). The other is the so-called Golden Rule – ‘treat others as you would like them to treat you’. That of course is not original to Jesus, but obviously was regarded by him as a fundamental rule for life.

The Teachings also include the subjects of:
encouraging other people,
creating order out of disorder,
combating injustice,
undertaking non-violent resistance to violence,
seeing other people in a positive light,
receiving spiritual nourishment for the task.

They address tricky questions like:
divorce,
how to regard old religious traditions,
what ought to be the attitude to money,
how to tell if you really are following Jesus' teaching,
what kinds of things it is OK to pray for,
what happens if you really do carry out the teachings.

I will expand briefly on just two of the teachings:
First, the idea of non-violent resistance to oppressive powers.
Second, the Lord's Prayer and why it actually belongs among the teachings.

I should say at this point that each one of the teachings, including the Beatitudes, is linked with all of the others. You can start with any one of them, and find that you are led easily and without disjunction, to all of the others. We can only think that Jesus must have worked on his teaching for a long time – perhaps many years – before he went public with it. He obviously regarded it as worth dying for. He would have known it had the gracefulness and wholeness of truth. From his own religious heritage he knew the sacredness of the ultimate values enshrined within it. In some cases he took the teaching one step further – particularly where he taught people to love their enemies. In any case, it is essential to remember that what Jesus taught is not true because he taught it. He taught it because it is true.

First, non-violent resistance to oppressive power. This is Jesus' legacy to the world. In the 20th century it was passed on through the unlikely medium of a Hindu – Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi read the Sermon on the Mount when he was in England studying law. He said this about Jesus: *The example of Jesus' suffering is a factor in the composition of my undying faith in non-violence. The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, been changed by his presence, his actions, and his words . . . I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people.*

Gandhi's subsequent non-violent overthrow of British rule in India was, of course, the inspiration for Dr Martin Luther King. His non-violent resistance to racial prejudice and persecution in the United States succeeded in removing unjust and prejudicial laws and placing black Americans on an equal legal footing with white Americans. Non-violent resistance to oppression is happening in large and small ways, in many places, today.

These are two examples of non-violent resistance as taught by Jesus: First, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Second, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evil-doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.’ ”

Non-violent resistance can be better understood in three ways:

1. Non-violent resistance is resistance to the power of evil itself. It does not mean running away from confrontation.
2. Non-violent resistance can create shame in the violent one. It can lead to an awareness of harm being done and a desire for reconciliation.
3. Non-violent resistance is an expression of love. The focus is on turning the violent opponent to repentance and from an enemy into a friend.

Secondly, the Lord’s Prayer. This is an expression of Jesus’ own spirituality. All of the things he suggests his followers include in their prayers are related to the creation of the Kingdom of heaven on earth. For that reason the prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount. We can be confident that this prayer emanates from Jesus and not from the gospel writers, for one very good reason: the Lord’s Prayer is not messianic. It makes no mention of an apocalyptic ‘end time’. It does not mention either a Messiah or the Greek version – ‘Christ’. It simply reminds Jesus’ followers that it is right to look to God for strength and endurance in carrying out his teaching.

What of God in all of this? An essential aspect of laying a renewed foundation for the beliefs of Christianity is finding the answer to this question: what kind of God can be seen in and through the teachings of Jesus? It is essential to remember that Jesus was first and last a Jew. It would not have occurred to him to try to formulate a definition of God (that has been a Christian preoccupation). No, Jesus did not write or speak a theological treatise. He simply did as I said before. In answer to his students’ questions about the Kingdom of heaven on earth, he gave them ethical principles couched in sayings and stories, or parables. In those parables, God is often the central character – as a man who had two sons, or as the owner of a vineyard – and so on.

Through those teachings we can first of all see the kind of human beings needed to make the best possible world. They are to be forgiving, not

condemning. They are to be compassionate, not unfeeling. They are to be just, not unjust. They are to be peaceful, not violent. In other words, they are to reflect a forgiving, compassionate, just and peace-loving Creator. What more do we need to know about God?

Jesus risked death at the hands of the authorities in order to make known his teachings. He obviously believed in the basic goodness of his fellow human beings, and their ability to make a better world. Traditional Christian doctrine from the third and fourth centuries CE says something totally different. Reflecting the Greek mythology of its day, it says Jesus was the divine Christ sent by God to be mediator between heaven and earth, and to die to bring about sinful humanity's reconciliation with God.

Progressive or Evolving Christianity does not believe in original sin, or in an interventionist judgmental God who interferes in the freedom of humanity. Instead, it says that the man Jesus was killed by the Romans because he was proclaiming teachings that can threaten unjust powers and transform humanity and the world. As the gospels say, the ordinary people heard him gladly, and more and more of them began to follow him. Rather than being dismissed as wishful thinking about a better world, Jesus' teachings were recognized as an actual threat to those who ruled through the exploitation and the brutalizing of subject people. The Roman rulers saw the growing appeal of his ideas with the people as a real threat to their authority.

The Jewish leadership thought he was another 'messianic pretender', even though he was against using violence. They still feared that his socially disruptive teaching could threaten their power-sharing arrangements with the Romans. To be fair to them, they were also concerned that the growing Jesus movement might trigger more brutal Roman punishment of the people. The ordinary people understood Jesus as rejecting violence and teaching them how to create a world of justice, peace and freedom.

By the end of the first century the Jewish idea of Messiah had become intertwined with Greek ideas about God and 'divine sons of God' who came to earth to be sacrificed for the people. Out of that interpretation of Jesus as divine 'Christ', came the deadly Christian charge against the Jews of 'Deicide' – the murder of God. Right up to the present day, Jews have also been called 'Christ killers'. The Progressive or Evolving Christian movement believes that liberating the church from messianic or christological dogma, plus a fresh reclaiming of the teachings of Jesus, will eliminate the ancient reason for hatred of Jews. It can also reconnect

Christians with Jesus' original purpose. A totally new understanding of the events of Easter can help to heal the church from its association with two thousand years of persecution of Jews, and bring about genuine reconciliation.

As I have noted several times in the book, Jesus' teachings have the capacity to create positive links between people of different faiths, and with people of no faith. His ethics have universal application. But it is very important that I say as clearly as I can that applying the teachings of Jesus to relations with people outside of Christianity does not entail their conversion to Christianity. In any case, most of the values Jesus espoused are already known in the other major faiths. Progressive Christianity is definitely not conversionist! But it does have the capacity to create links which can help bring about universal reconciliation, harmony and peace.

Around the world, mainly in developed nations, growing numbers of Christians are saying that the time has come to rethink the *raison d'être* of the community of people who call themselves followers of Jesus. That's what I'm saying in my book, 'The World According to Jesus'.

Lorraine Parkinson, Melbourne, Australia, 2011.

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